

SOME THOUGHTS
ON READING

By Walter de la Mare.



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I should first like to say how happy I am to have the privilege of being a guest of the school to-day. It is a happiness with only one cloud, and that is that I am at this end of the room and not, with you, at the other.

The looker-on, it is said, sees most of the game but many experiences of this kind have proved to me that, provided he does not speak too long, it is amusing to listen to any speaker, perhaps even more so if he is speaking very badly. That is my only hope this afternoon. For but a few days ago a fellow guest at a reading assured me that the only criticism he could make was that I had done very badly what obviously I wanted to get done as quickly as possible. His criticism suggested a visit to the dentist. But after all, even the best of readers can convey only part of what he is reading, and especially if he is reading poetry. The reason for this is, I think, that the words can convey far more than the mind is capable of receiving at the mere pace of their utterance.

Roughly our reading is divided into two kinds; that of the matter-of-fact, and that of the

matter of the imagination. The difficulty arises in distinguishing between these two kinds, for unless we read even matter-of-fact imaginatively, comprehensively and reflectively, we lose the greater part of what we call its meaning. Words are but symbols, they have to be translated into some kind of experience before they can be understood.

It is perhaps a little complimentary to describe a newspaper as consisting chiefly of matter-of-fact. But a very large part of it does consist of bald description of what actually has happened. To understand, to comprehend in any real sense one tenth of what appears in every day's "Times" for example, would require years of the hardest labour. Nor is this merely true of what we call the more important events, such as we find in to-day's paper; the Dockers' Revolt, the Reply to France, the Ruhr, the German Wage Struggle. Omitting these, we still have every conceivable kind of personal event. Everything in life may be woven in between the three crises which appear on the first page: Births, Marriages and Deaths. We read of little personal triumphs, terrors or rewards, intolerable sorrows, disgrace, failure, shining honour and success — we read of them almost as calmly and carelessly as if humanity consisted of dummies in a tailor's shop, or waxworks in a show.

But apart from the newspaper, what of the facts not of yesterday and last week, but those of conglomerations of years and centuries ago — the facts of history and science? Take but the simplest of the enormous implications each contains. Cæsar conquered Britain; William Shakespeare died in 1616; King Charles I was executed at

Whitehall. What do we mean by a King? What kind of king was Charles I? What kind of man? Did he deserve his death? Are men justified in killing each other? Are men justified in killing kings? What is it like to have one's head chopped off? Does death matter much if it is nothing more than just that? Is Charles still living? If so, where? Has he any consciousness of us, and what exactly is our consciousness of him? Has he any remembrance of this world? Does he smile when he thinks of that cold wintry morning and how he put on thicker and warmer underclothes than usual to keep him from shivering on the scaffold? What was life for such people as ourselves in England, in the world, when King Charles died? Are we better off now than in those days, or worse? How far has man altered in the meantime his conception of royalty?

I am not suggesting these questions to the examiner in History, and I am thankful to say that I have never been called upon to answer many of them. All I mean to suggest is, how immensely wide a region of experience and knowledge is essential to the complete understanding of any single historical fact. So, too, with science. The bare fact isolated we can repeat like a parrot. In order to realise the very simplest, to make it true for ourselves, that is, we have to read like a lynx, think like a steam engine, and work like a navvy. But apart from this kind of reading, there is the reading that consists not of actualities or of historical or scientific matter-of-fact, but of what we call literature. And the chief difference between history, science, and matter-of-fact, and

literature is the personal element. The moment a man attempts to tell the truth as he not only thinks but feels it, what he says becomes charged with that man himself. The greater he is as a creative and imaginative writer, the more difficult it is to realise to the full not only with the mind but with the heart and the imagination, the full and inmost meaning of what he says. He expresses by means of his words a kind of actuality fully explored, but in order to make it our actuality, we have to translate those words into our personal experience — to share it. The rarer, the deeper, the more intense and fine that experience, the more difficult it is to share.

When we come to the works of great creative imagination, such as our finest plays, poetry and fiction, however great our effort may be to understand them, we can, I think, be only partially successful. To be successful at all needs the very closest attention, not only of the senses and the intellect, but of the whole being. Poetry and fiction, of course, are usually considered to be amusing rather than a stiff way of spending one's time, but to get the most out of them that we can, I am rather inclined to think the opposite to be true. May I give a small personal experience. Some little time ago I was reading an article in a magazine called "Mind." By the title I knew that it was likely to prove a good deal out of my depth. Apart from that, it was early afternoon, and I was feeling a little drowsy. Still, I read it very slowly and carefully and with all the attention I could. After reading one paragraph even more opaque than the others, I found that

I was not understanding in the least what the writer was talking about. This experience was so normal, however, that I might not have troubled any further. I turned back once more: and then a quiet voice within whispered, "Read it faster." I read it faster — and faster; and lo and behold, everything became as clear as clear can be. This set me speculating. The greater part of my reading is of an imaginative character. This particular paper was philosophical, and since work of the imagination requires the use of all the senses as well as all the powers of the mind, it occurred to me to wonder whether it was not therefore very much more difficult reading; that in other words imaginative reading is a far more energetic exercise of the mind than any other. Now, if we read poetry at all — unless, dismal thought, we are made to — we read it with delight. And to delight in a thing requires all the energies of which we are capable. To delight enough in a thousandth part of the world we know is the rarest of all human achievements. So, too, with books. Reading gives us the opportunity of realising, increasing, refining life, making it more vivid and fresh and meaningful with delight.

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